

Mark Frutkin 2001 : *Iron Mountain*. Vancouver : Beach Holme. 102 pp.

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“Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden” (1909, 26-27). This passage from Philip Sidney’s *A Defence of Poesie* is echoed in “A Horsehair Brush”, the first of the poems in this volume. “The artist paints with a brush of horsehair/drawn from the horse he is painting” (5), we are told in the first two lines. It is the artist who not only creates the world in which we live, through art, but takes from the world itself the very materials which enable art to take place at all, mixing his paints into finer, more orderly shades. The artist, like the poet, is a creator, utterly self-reflexive, inexorably inventive and yet, ultimately, no more able to explain *why* than the scenes which emerge onto the canvas: “Not even the painter knows/why they are going to Shu” (5). Not even the Emperor, who spends his days in search of the goddess, only to find consolation of a sort in “a poor man’s hut” (9) where his “heart is soothed/by the sight of two wooden buckets/resting side by side in the doorway” (9). What are we being told here? That the meek shall inherit the earth? That labour dignifies the labourer? or, since it is the artist with his horsehair brush who has brought this brief respite into being, that a still life provides more ease than a life of restless action; that it is better to be a peasant than a king? Perhaps so. In a later poem, “Tablecloth”, it is the humble repair work of a nameless seamstress who has bothered to laboriously stitch up a hole in a tablecloth, rather than the fine food of the fancy French restaurant which is celebrated: “a bit of blank verse/embedded in linen” (72). I wonder what the chef would make of such praise, and of the disdain for his work which is implicit in the poem.

Life on earth, or perhaps the earth itself, is an end in itself. This is what the peasant knows, and what Frutkin knows; he has, after all, been “Reading about deep ecology” (98) and, as he sits on the iron mountain of the volume’s title he finds

the earth a good mother
who helped you to walk,
to rise for a while and be human,
and then takes you back
takes you back again
where you can be what you were
before you were born.
“Inside Gatineau Park” (20)

The poem is careful to emphasise the peace of the iron mountain: he sits beside a “Tranquil pond” (20), reminiscent, I assume deliberately, of Walden pond, far from noisy hikers or mountain bikes. The tranquility of the place provides the frame for the poem’s peaceful, indeed rather passive, philosophy: we were, we are, and we shall be again. What it is that we once were, are, and shall always be, of course, although the poem does not elaborate, is atoms, and truly we shall be at one with the universe, as over the billions of years, the atoms which were once us, drift across the face of eternity. Ecology at last provides a faith that we in the cynical West can unashamedly adhere to. In the last poem of the collection, “Wilderness”

we are reminded again that human culture must eventually return to nothingness: “No maps./No street signs./No scouts. No trail blazers. No trackers” (102). The earth, in a state of true wilderness may remain, however, and despite the absence of humanity, all has not disappeared. The last line of the poem, and of the book, declares: “No end. Nowhere to begin” (102). Without human beings to measure such things, perhaps the very concepts of endings and beginnings have no significance.

In another poem, “Silkworm” (28), the idea of rebirth—reincarnation even—is floated, lightly as a moth’s wings, across the page. Does the silkworm know it will metamorphose? Does it have memories of wings? Is it memory which stimulates rebirth? Is the fact that the silk moth is equipped with flightless wings at all relevant? The questions seem foolish and trite when extrapolated from the poem and rewritten as prose. Here is the power and danger of poetry. It enables us to articulate the unknown and unknowable, but can also disguise lightness as depth. Perhaps it does both at once: the reader must choose.

What then, is the role of human beings in this ongoing material universe? Nothing we do seems quite right, or even worthwhile. Our search for the perfect timepiece is forever ongoing, “our machines never quite match up” (36). In “Villa-Lobos Lugs His Cello Through the Amazon Jungle”, the eponymous hero is presented as a latter-day Orpheus, calming the chaos of the jungle with his music: “... when he rests and plays/each leaf takes its perfect place” (45) while songbirds are drawn to the beauty of his music. But this idea is scuppered too. In his sleep the musician “dreams an entire orchestra of night/that by morning will be nothing but dew” (45). The man perceives his music as creating and ordering the world, but it is pure solipsism; his view of the world is mediated by his dreams and imagination, but the jungle remains.

But can art have an effect? Does it bestow some form of immortality? Villa-Lobos’s music is left, “lingering in the triple fan of leaves/in the breathing of umbrella trees” (45), and while García Lorca’s “grave is lost” (47) in “Death of a Poet”, his “words remain” (47). This is the inevitable wish of the artist, and of the poet in particular who can articulate such aspirations most explicitly. It is, after all, a convention stretching from the classics, through the Renaissance—remember Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18”—through Romanticism—Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—and into the twentieth century where it surfaces in poems such as W.B. Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium”. Frutkin leaves the question, as he does most of the questions he tackles, fairly open, though the act of asking is in itself a kind of affirmation.

Indeed, the collection as a whole is a kind of affirmation, an affirmation of life without transcendent meaning. We are born, we die. But the world remains, and natural beauty, our dreams, and our art are a cause for celebration and enjoyment. Frutkin is not a poet to dwell on the crueller, nastier side of life, or of death. His images and ideas gently stimulate, but do not shock or scandalise. This is unusual in a world of violence, war and suffering, where we expect our attention to be grabbed, and are not accustomed to go looking on our own account. It is easy to dismiss the book after a casual perusal, but careful rereading is rewarding, if only for the gentle contrast it offers to the clamouring demands made on our habitually overwhelmed senses.

WORKS CITED

Sidney, Philip 1909 (1581): *A Defence of Poesie*. London: Cassell.